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Chair: Ms. Valerie Bradford



Standing Committee on Science and Research

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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 114 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. All witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

I'd like to remind all members of the following points: Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking, and all comments should be directed through the chair. Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or by Zoom. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French.

Thank you all for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(i) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, October 31, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the impact of the criteria for awarding federal funding on research excellence in Canada.

It's now my pleasure to welcome, as individuals, Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot, director of natural resources, energy and environment at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, by video conference; Dr. Philip Kitcher, John Dewey professor emeritus of philosophy, by video conference; and Dr. John Robson, who's here with us in person and is the executive director of Climate Discussion Nexus.

Welcome to you all.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

Dr. Exner-Pirot, I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot (Director, Energy, Natural Resources and Environment, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for inviting me to testify on this important topic.

I interpret the study as assessing whether particular subjective or ideological considerations are distorting the type of research being pursued and funded in Canada today.

I share my perspective as someone who has been a principal applicant, co-applicant or collaborator on several successful, and unsuccessful, SSHRC grants. In addition, I spent several years in administrative positions at the University of Saskatchewan in roles that could be described as DEI-focused with regard to indigenous education programs and initiatives.

As a senior fellow at a think tank rather than a faculty member at a university, perhaps I can provide an outside observer's perspective on the ideological bias that has permeated our research systems, as someone who neither needs nor wants to conform to it anymore.

It has become the trend in recent years for research funding programs and faculty hiring processes to require applicants to describe their commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, principles. As the SSHRC website states, DEI principles "must" be integrated into research design. This can occur in different ways, such as through intersectional analysis, gender-based analysis plus, anti-racist and anti-ableist approaches or disaggregated data collection.

The University Affairs website provides guidance to prospective academics on drafting DEI statements. It suggests, "If you're new to thinking about EDI, and haven't considered how multiple overlapping systems of privilege or oppression may shape your point of view, consider pursuing some training." Furthermore, "If you've not engaged in anti-racist service or research, think deeply about why you haven't engaged in these activities, and what blind spots you may have because of your lack of engagement."

I don't imagine many people are against diversity, inclusion and equity in principle. I personally am not. However, if I may quote Harvard Law School professor Randall L. Kennedy, "the diversity statement regime leans heavily and tendentiously towards varieties of academic leftism and implicitly discourages candidates who harbor ideologically conservative dispositions."

As MLI senior fellow and associate professor of political science at the University of Guelph Dave Snow wrote in *The Hub*, there are currently several SSHRC funding streams that invite research that subscribes to a particular world view, to the exclusion of others. These include grants to study “shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization” and the race, gender and diversity initiative.

I do not intend to make a straw man of the various research streams our agencies fund nor imply that good research is neither conducted nor supported. I do not intend to mock or undermine the objectives of inclusivity, diversity and equity. However, the phenomenon of DEI has, in my opinion and that of many others, gone too far in narrowing and directing the kind of research pursued in Canada, to the exclusion of many other worthy avenues of research.

My own think tank, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, has evaluated the ideological bias in Canadian universities. I know you've heard from Professor Dummitt. In a survey conducted by Leger, they found that 88% of professors identified as left-leaning, versus only 12% on the right. Clearly, that's not representative of the political leanings of the Canadian public. South of the border, this has led to push-back. Several prominent universities, including Harvard, MIT and, most recently, the University of Michigan, no longer require diversity statements for faculty members during hiring or promotion. Several right-leaning states have banned DEI programs at state-funded universities.

If I may conclude on a personal note, my own research has often focused on indigenous and northern development, human security and resource extraction. I have co-authored many op-eds and peer-reviewed papers and I have edited volumes with first nations, Métis and Inuit colleagues. Ostensibly, these are encouraged topics. However, I have often felt that the kinds of questions I'm interested in and the conclusions I draw do not fit into the conventional Canadian academic space. I think many people like me have been excluded or have elected to work in the private sector, consulting or think tank worlds because we do not feel at home in universities.

I think this self-selection will be demonstrated even more acutely among the emerging generation of Canadian scholars and that the problem will get worse before it gets better. I do not think sorting based on political ideology is desirable, and I do not think it lends itself to research excellence.

As our elected representatives, you play an important role in ensuring our federal research funding system reflects the aspirations and needs of our society and economy. I expect it would be difficult to explain and justify to many of your constituents the criteria by which some of our research funding is allocated. I hope your oversight can help recalibrate our research funding models to become more interested in outcomes and processes and to maintain a focus on the creation and dissemination of objective, falsifiable research knowledge.

• (1635)

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now turn to Dr. Kitcher.

I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes, please.

Mr. Philip Kitcher (John Dewey Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

First of all, let me thank you for inviting me. Unfortunately, when I set this up, I thought we would be finished by 4:30, and I have another appointment, I'm afraid, at 5:30. Let me just say that at the beginning.

In general, there is a big question about how governments support scientific research. Surely what they want to do, if they are thinking clearly and if they are thinking ethically, is to try to find and help those researchers who are likely to contribute to the public good.

Now, it's easy to make silly and short-sighted decisions with respect to these issues, because one can of course try to take a direct approach to a very serious problem and neglect basic research, so I want to begin by saying that one of the real lessons of 20th century science is that the route to work that really does contribute to the general good may be long and indirect. That's the first thing to say.

The second thing to say is that there are deep ethical issues here. There is no avoiding taking account of the needs and the differences in needs among the population of a nation. It is impossible, I think, to act correctly in funding without taking into account the fact that different research may affect different groups differently.

There have been, in the past, pieces of funded research that have done considerable harm. It's often thought, of course, that much research doesn't do much particular good. That is vulnerable to the error that I diagnosed to begin with: the error of not being patient, not recognizing that some things need to emerge slowly.

More importantly, in the age of AI, it is especially necessary to think about the consequences of research and how various groups will be affected. It's at this point, I think, that one has to take into account that within a nation like Canada, many groups have historically been neglected, but the ethical thing is not necessarily to go overboard in responding by, as it were, directing all resources towards that population. That population deserves help, but so do other populations in the country deserve a fair shake.

I have seen in my own country, the United States, an overemphasis on the needs of certain groups at certain times and, I have to say, the subordination of many needy groups to the interests of people who are already well off. This is an ethical tragedy, and one cannot get away from the fact that it's necessary to reintroduce the ethical stance into democratic policy-making.

What I want to urge you to do is to represent in your thinking all the various groups who might be affected by a given program of scientific research. I don't think we are going to get anywhere in crafting fair policies in complex multicultural societies today unless there is a lot more discussion to identify the needs of different segments of the population and to respond to those who are neediest without neglecting others.

This, I think, is an extremely complex task. There is no getting away from ethics; there is, and should be, a getting away from ideology. The important thing to do is to find a way to distinguish between ideological responses and ethical responses. That, I think, can only be done by thorough and repeated democratic discussion. There's no shortcut to that either.

Thank you very much.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kitcher.

I just want to let you know that if the time comes and you need to leave, you can always submit a brief to us with further comments and testimony, which we can attach to our report.

At approximately what time would you have to leave?

Mr. Philip Kitcher: It would be just before 5:30.

The Chair: That's fine. Great.

We'll now turn to Dr. Robson.

I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes, please.

Dr. John Robson (Executive Director, Climate Discussion Nexus, As an Individual): Thank you very much for inviting me to address the committee.

I'm here as a citizen and also as somebody deeply embedded in academia. I've taught at four North American universities. My parents, my grandfather, my uncle and two cousins were all professors. Despite that, I'm here to say that in considering the criteria for funding advanced research, what you need to do is get rid of the criteria and the funding. It's not the business of the federal government.

I say that for two reasons. The first of those is that as members of Parliament, you have critical responsibilities to the citizens. We elect you. You're the only part of the entire state apparatus on which we have input. Most of your core responsibilities are in a horrendous mess, and you need to get back to them. The amount you're spending on post-secondary education is making the mess there worse, so this is win-win: It's a provincial responsibility.

[*Translation*]

I believe that the members of the Bloc Québécois will agree on that point.

[*English*]

Somehow, however, the feds are spending roughly \$15 billion on it. This is at a time when the nation is over a trillion dollars in debt. You need to get back to things like balancing the budget.

Let me draw on some very recent news stories. First, we just got this bizarre Christmas tax break. It will save us each \$4.51 and cost business millions to administer. You guys need to be fixing the tax code, not genetic codes.

Then there's defending the realm. This nation is defenceless, not just in the Arctic but everywhere. Our military is in ruins. You shouldn't be thinking about antimatter; you should be thinking about ammunition and getting us someone to fire it.

Then there's infrastructure. I just saw a story that Via Rail is consuming subsidies of \$1,000 a passenger and can't make the trains run on time. I was in an airport. We just hailed International Civil Aviation Day. Our airports have lousy Wi-Fi and no plugs.

In another story, the government just promised drinking water on aboriginal reserves. Well, that's a core responsibility—tap water, not heavy water.

Then there's the Federal Court. They have to curtail hearings because they haven't got staff and they haven't got funding. Justice is as core a duty of government as you could find, other than national defence.

This is the kind of thing the 338 members of Parliament need to be on full time. You shouldn't be chasing laser beams. It's not even in your jurisdiction. You don't have time for it.

I don't really think—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Chair, I would like to speak.

I'm hearing both languages at the same time, which makes it difficult to understand anything.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: I'm sorry, Mr. Robson. The problem is on my end, not yours.

The Chair: I'll try to see what's going on.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Am I the only one having this problem?

The Chair: I think so.

Mr. Denis Trudel: I'm the only francophone here, which would explain why I'm the only one having this problem.

Dr. John Robson: Do you want me to speak in French?

Mr. Denis Trudel: Yes, I don't understand English. We are an officially bilingual country, you know.

Dr. John Robson: Yes, I have heard that.

Mr. Denis Trudel: It doesn't seem like it sometimes, but Canada is still officially bilingual.

Dr. John Robson: I can say the word "bienvenu", but I'll have to continue in English.

Mr. Denis Trudel: That's wonderful. We could then understand you in Quebec and New Brunswick, but elsewhere it would be a little more difficult.

• (1645)

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll take a break while we try to sort out what's happening with the audio.

• (1645)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: We have a little change of plan. Between the glitches and the votes, we're going to dismiss the second panel today because, unfortunately, I don't think we'll get to it.

You're certainly welcome to stay if that works with your schedule. We will have to reschedule you to come either Thursday or another day.

Now we will continue. I stopped the clock for Mr. Robson, who had another two minutes left in his opening statement.

Would you like to continue?

Dr. John Robson: Thank you.

You have so many vital things you have to do. You're a critical link in the government, and as you see, you're overstretched. If we cannot provide translation in this meeting, you shouldn't really be involved in—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Madam Chair, the problem has not been solved.

I hear Mr. Robson and two other voices, which means I don't understand anything at all.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll suspend while we try again to sort this out.

• (1650)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

The Chair: We're adjourned.

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